

The Doctor Who Thing

So somehow or other, in the 1980s, people seemed to have the idea that I was supposed to like "Doctor Who" for some reason. I don't know why.

I stopped watching television in the mid-1970s because almost everything on there was rubbish and I could spend my time better reading novels and short stories. I didn't own or watch a television from mid-1970s to the early 1990s. Never having seen Peter Davison on the idiot box I had no idea what people were talking about when they said that the vet was the doctor. That whole conversation was incomprehensible to me.

In the 80s I knew two entirely separate people who were Doctor Who fans and one of them, Paul Flanagan who was a co-worker with me at Children's World, was continually trying to persuade or trick me into watching his Doctor Who videos with him. He was a nutcase. He drank mild beer from a can and that was his only drink. He never had tea, coffee, fruit juice or fizzy pop. Only beer. He drove through the narrow little lanes of Somerset at breakneck speed and laughed out loud at the fact that his dad always told him to slow down. In those lanes a speeding car could at any moment come around a bend to collide with a tractor or a van and Paul didn't care.

Paul lived in the Somerset town of Street, near Glastonbury but he still had a room in his parents' house a few miles away. He showed me that room. It was filled with Doctor Who memorabilia.

He was convinced that I should play Doctor Who. He thought I was the perfect actor for that role. He also thought I was an "old man". I was 33.

Paul and I were both working actors in a sub-Equity stratum of acting for a charity group working in educational settings.

Paul was ecstatic when he was permitted to play a bit part in a fan-made video featuring the actor who, Paul said, had been Sgt. Benton of U.N.I.T. (which meant nothing to me). Years later, when the internet became a thing, I saw the video that Paul had been so joyful to part of. The short movie was called "Wartime" (1988) and the IMDB credits Paul as playing "Man". Last time I checked the IMDB had also confused Paul's identity with some other completely separate actor with the same name.

I remained oblivious to the progress of the Doctor Who television show and knew nothing of the "Fifth Doctor", the "Sixth Doctor" or the "Seventh Doctor". I also remained unaware that Angela Bruce, whom I've previously mentioned in connection with her minor leadership role in the Emin, had taken on a role in one of the "U.N.I.T." things. I learned about all of these developments years later.

The thing I didn't like about the Doctor Who show was that they had taken one of my childhood memories from the 1960s and turned it into something else.

Children's television in the 60s had all sorts of crazy mad things like "Pinky and Perky" and "Crackerjack". Doctor Who, in those days, was quite an interesting show for children. They had started with an educational purpose wrapped up in an adventure show. The Doctor was an unscrupulous, untrustworthy, self-centred egoist who accidentally or grudgingly helped people. If he had a heart of gold he was keeping it well hidden. He cared only about himself, his granddaughter and his exploration of the universe. He helped people only when he felt that he absolutely had to.

The Doctor's companions were Ian and Barbara, a science teacher and a history teacher. Their roles in the show were to teach the viewers a little something about science and a little something about history. Just a taster, nothing very much, nothing too heavy to spoil the adventure but always a little educational aspect to appeal to the same bright children who were readers of "Look and Learn" magazine.

I loved that show when it was what it was. I was a reader of science and also of science fiction. I also loved the BBC Radiophonic Workshop's soundtracks. The BBC and ITV channels were experimenting in the relatively new medium of television. There had been a Journey into Space show on ITV and the BBC's Doctor Who came from the same person, Sydney Newman.

The original vision for the Doctor Who show was to avoid the silly monster movie kind of thing. Sydney Newman was aware of serious science fiction and he knew that all those monster movies coming out of Hollywood were a different genre altogether from the good science fiction. Consequently the aliens in Doctor Who were not portrayed as monsters. The Daleks were sad characters who had destroyed their world in an atomic war and were reduced to mutated jelly-like blobs in silly looking travel machines. It was a teaching fable. Alongside of the fable of "The Hare and the Tortoise" or "Brer Rabbit" we were presented with the Fable of the Foolish Aliens who Lost Everything Because of Hatred. Similarly the Cybermen were a moral tale of losing what is important in life by trying to artificially preserve that life. Spare part surgery gone mad.

Sadly these ideas of teaching within a science fiction fable were gradually overtaken by the public desire for scary monsters. The original ideals were lost. Patrick Troughton's Doctor was very entertaining to watch but the characterisation had changed along with the face. The regenerated Doctor was even sometimes willing to help people on purpose and without any grudging about it.

That added to the mystery. Was he still the same person? And, if he wasn't, Who was he? The Daleks had changed too. They were turning into monsters. The show was following a trend. The camp and kooky 1960s had decided that monsters were cool and everything from The Addams Family to The Munsters to Hammer Horror and Famous Monsters of Filmland Magazine were all the fashionable thing. The BBC were getting onto that bandwagon. By the end of the 60s Doctor Who was over.

The story had reached its conclusion and The Doctor had been recaptured by his people. At the beginning he had been a mysterious character from an unknown background. Hence the use of the word "Who". That was the ongoing mystery. Who was he? Where (or When) was he from? Once that mystery was solved the show was over.

Then came the sequel. The BBC brought in John Pertwee from The Navy Lark to play The Doctor and the scripts from then onwards would be based around devils, dinosaurs, giant robots and “hiding behind the sofa”.

That was when I lost interest in the thing. Instead of going downstairs to the living room to watch my mum’s television set I stayed upstairs in my room reading serious “proper” science fiction. My younger sister got the craze for monster movies like “The Exorcist” and “The Omen” but I stayed with serious reading.

Comparing horror films with literature was no contest in my opinion. Literature would win hands down every time.

I never re-kindled much of a liking for Doctor Who although I eventually started watching television again, in the 1990s when TV had become less racist, less sexist and more inventive. I liked Paul McGann’s version of The Doctor in the movie. I also eventually saw “Genesis of the Daleks” many years after the original broadcast and I thought that one was quite good.

I was pleased when Chris Chibnall and Jodie Whittaker gave us a Doctor Who show which returned to its roots and had educational elements about Rosa Parks, Ada Lovelace, Mary Shelley and the Partition of India. Sadly though the Doctor Who fanatics didn’t like that so it got changed again. I like the new backstory though. The unknown child from some unknown universe is a perfect new origin. They’ve recreated the “Who are they? Where did they come from?” mystery on which the original show always depended.

Big Finish audio have done a lot of good work exploring the stories which television apparently didn’t want to or didn’t have the budget for or couldn’t figure out how to do. Sadly the price of the audio dramas is beyond my humble means to purchase and so those of us who don’t have any impressive amount in the bank have to wait until these adventures are broadcast by BBC radio (which they do occasionally) or until Humble Bundle gives us a deal for charity (which also happens sometimes).

I still think it is strange though that Big Finish mostly tells better stories than the TV show. What is wrong with these showrunners? Why can’t they sort the thing out properly? I like Ncuti Gatwa’s Doctor and some of Russell Davies’ writing for the most recent series; And bringing in Disney for FX support is a shrewd move. I don’t like most of Steven Moffat’s contributions because he obviously doesn’t like or understand the science bit of science fiction. If you set fire to the Planet Earth’s atmosphere or crack the Moon in half and neither of these events causes any disasters on the ground then you shouldn’t call it science fiction. Whatever that sort of story is it certainly has no relation to science.

The good science fiction on screen based media almost always comes from North America these days. From Disney or Amazon or Apple or Paramount.

Never mind. I always fall back to my default position of books and comics.